Journal X

Volume 5
Number 1 *Autumn 2000/Spring 2001*

Article 7

2020

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"What's the difference between kinky and perverted?" the tendentious joke goes: "Kinky means using a feather; perverted means using the whole chicken." The satisfied laugh or groan elicited by the joke depends on the listener's anticipated (and, for most of us understandable) distaste at the thought of having sex with a chicken — either functionally or proximately. But the difference between kinky and perverse can be dangerous as well as distasteful, for the line separating one from the other demarcates zones of habitability: one feather is okay, but the whole chicken is not. Jokes reinforce the line between habitable and uninhabitable, but depending on the time, place, and persons involved, disrespect for that line can turn deadly. When JoAnn Wypijewski went to Laramie, Wyoming, after Matthew Shepard's murder, she was told a different joke: "'You can have sex with a sheep in Wyoming, just don't tie the shepard to the fence'" (70). Gallows or humor?

While crossing into the zone of uninhabitability may elicit a range of responses from laughter to execution, the line that marks the exit from habitable zones shifts with time, culture, situation, and thus is always determined by society, by the shared understanding of the audience. The first joke tacitly suggests that utilizing a chicken for sex makes a body perverted; in fact, it is not the presence or absence of the chicken but the audience's laughter that does so. It is thus entirely possible for a body to cross the threshold into abjection *and not be aware of the transgression* until the audience's response indicates a line has been crossed. Critical theories informed by the

work of de Saussure, Lacan, and Foucault — work that powerfully called into question Cartesian models of subject formation — has enabled scrutiny of these lines, both their construction and maintenance. The language I deploy here — "abjection," "zones of habitability" — reveals my indebtedness to certain theorists engaged in this kind of scrutiny, particularly the work of Judith Butler in *Bodies that Matter*. Interrogating the formation and the materiality of the subject, Butler finds that the production of subjects "requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings" (3). Abjection is not simply a matter of othering, it "designates a degraded or cast out status within the terms of sociality" (243). Today in the United States, zones of abjection include those states of being that are cast out from the norm and that invite violent consequences: the physically or mentally disabled body as well as the black or homosexual body. The subject "fantasizes" that the abject constitutes a threat to its own integrity: "I would rather die than do or be that!" (Butler 243). But the threat is just that, a fantasy; the iteration of norms through utterances or acts (jokes or executions) maintains that fantasy by violently casting out the threatening body or bodies. Fortunately for those of us who live close to the line (and I would say that is each of us some times), critical inquiry into the economic, sexual, and historical constructions of the subject has attended to how the lines separating subject from abject are generated and sustained. However, it has not examined closely enough its own participation in the reinforcement of those lines. When criticism relies on the same shared understandings as the joke about the chicken, it works to maintain those lines. One of the most damaging and most commonly shared understandings assumes that fear is the "normal" response to abjection.

Criticism of the brief altercation between the Pardoner and the Host at the end of Chaucer's *The Pardoner's Tale* provides a useful heuristic device for examining such shared assumptions. In *The Canterbury Tales*, the Prioress' odd brooch and even the Friar's cupidity, however contemptible, still fall within the range of habitable, acceptable space. They remain in the company of pilgrims; neither is singled out for particular castigation. Only the Pardoner crosses the line into abjection, an excess made manifest not by his own actions but by the Host's vehement response. The scene I am using takes only sixty lines and occurs almost as an afterthought to *The Pardoner's Tale*. At the end of his tale, the Pardoner invites the company to purchase absolution from him, either forgetting he has already revealed his game or assuming he is good enough to dupe even these pilgrims who are aware of it. Of all the company, the Pardoner invites the Host first: "I rede that oure Hoost heere shal bigynne / For he is moost envoluped in synne" (lines 941-2). The Host denies the Pardoner's offer: "'Nay, nay!' quod he, 'thanne have I Cristes curs! . . . / Thou woldest make me kisse thy olde breech, / And swere it were a relyk of a seint, / Though it were with thy fundament depeint!'" (946, 948-50). The Host rightly specifies the consequences of paying for absolution without true confession: not redemption but "Cristes curs." And he further exposes the Pardoner's game. These are not saints' relics, but the Pardoner's own relics, collected from wherever, possibly even from his own ass. But the Host follows his refusal with a threat: "I wolde I hadde thy coillons in myn hond / . . . Lat kutte hem of" (952, 954). When

he follows his refusal with a violent threat, the Host participates in the iteration of a norm that works to cast out the Pardoner; the threat signifies that the Pardoner has crossed a line, the consequences for which are violent.

The short altercation between the Host and Pardoner has received little critical attention until recently when interest in subjectivity and abjection has rendered the Pardoner's contestable morality and sexuality irresistible. While a number of recent studies offer intelligent, alternative explanations of what makes the Pardoner's offer so unpardonable, on one point they agree: the Host threatens the Pardoner because he fears him. Yet if the scene — replete with ambiguities and laden with emotion — begs for an analysis of its emotion, it provides almost no information about either the Pardoner's or the Host's emotional state; thus we can never know what the Host feels. Instead of acknowledging the text's silence, though, many critics interpolate their own culturally inflected understandings of emotion into the text, a practice that is, of course, defensible on the grounds that any act of interpretation is also an act of interpolation, but my argument is that an ethical reading will consider the implications of positing one emotion over another.

A quick survey of several recent studies reveals the tendency to posit uninterrogated assumptions about the Host's reaction to the Pardoner: Monica McAlpine characterizes the Host's response as a reaction to a threat (17); H. Marshall Leicester claims that the Pardoner embodies the "horror of existence" (44); Allen Frantzen discusses the Host's "frightened and frightening responses" (144); and Carolyn Dinshaw speculates that "[p]erhaps, sensing something of the Pardoner's lack, the Host fears for his own manhood" (163). All of these writers rest their logic on this notion of fear but fail to explain how they know it is fear that the Host feels. Dinshaw even acknowledges her reliance on a particular interpretation of the Host's emotional state: "Harry's response powerfully corroborates the associations I have been pointing to here" (168). The text of the tale gives little indication of precisely what the Host feels. The only overt mention of emotion comes at the end of the scene when the Host says he will not "pleye" with any "angry man" (951). This refers to the Pardoner's emotional state, not Harry Bailey's, though it is just as likely that the Host responds out of anger rather than fear. Any interpretation of the Host's emotions would require a justification based on careful reading and logic. Yet these writers, who are impressively careful in their research and in the construction of their arguments, assume they know the Host's emotions but refrain from providing any evidence for those assumptions. Even if they are correct that the Host fears, they would need either to theorize or historicize their assumptions about the Host's emotions. They do neither. Nor do they consider that the superlatively masculine Harry Bailey threatens violence out of an aggressive impulse instead of a fearful one. As a result, their arguments finally participate in and reinforce a shared understanding that abjection provokes fear. Such a shared understanding works to establish fear as an essential response to abjection — an essentialization that poses the possibility of violent consequences for abjected bodies.

The problem in attributing fear to the Host can be seen in McAlpine's ground-breaking essay, "The Pardoner's Homosexuality and How it Matters."

The description of the Pardoner in *The General Prologue* certainly contributes to McAlpine's interpretation of the Pardoner as a homosexual. The text indicates an ambivalent sexuality when the narrator conjectures that the Pardoner is either already castrated or effeminate: "I trowe he were a geldyng or a mare" (*General Prologue* 691). Where evidence of his masculinity should be — in his lap — he has instead a fungible penis, a "male" in which he keeps his "relics." Thus, at the end of his tale, when the Pardoner invites the Host over to "kisse the relikes," he implicitly invites the Host to kiss the "male" part in his lap, an invitation to fellatio. In case the Host should be too dull to understand such a subtle come-on, the Pardoner ends his request by directing the Host to "'Unbokele thy purs,'" inviting the Host not just to part with his money (contained within the purse) but to expose himself sexually (*Pardoner's Tale* 945); "purs" appears as a gloss for penis (specifically as an instrument for sexual pleasure) in the Wife's prologue (44b). The Pardoner's offer thus contains a fairly explicit sexual invitation. While it would be wrong to ignore the sexual come-on in the Pardoner's offer, it is equally wrong to interpret this as a scene of homosexuality and homophobia. Allen Frantzen appropriately remarks on the ahistorical assumptions of McAlpine's argument: "It is not necessary to insist that [the Pardoner] is homosexual or to identify the Pardoner as gay; to do so is to assume (without evidence) that such a category constitutes medieval identity when it seems, rather, to describe acts performed by certain persons that contributed to their identity but did not define them" (133). While it's possible that the Pardoner's offer constitutes a threat, it is far more likely a spiritual than a physical or sexual one.

When Monica McAlpine argues for the Pardoner's homosexuality, she almost assuredly does so out of concern for justice and from an antihomophobic stance. But if the Pardoner's sexuality matters, then so does the Host's response. If she were right about the Pardoner, then assuming the Host is homophobic serves to establish a tradition of fearing homosexuals; the implication is that people have always feared the homosexual — an essentializing move. The danger in McAlpine's argument lies in its perpetuation of fear as an understood response to abjected bodies, in this case, the homosexual body. Though Frantzen and others address other, more historically accurate readings of the Pardoner's abjection, they still assume the Pardoner incites fear when they participate in a "shared understanding" that the abject is to-be-feared (just as the guy with the chicken is to-be-laughed-at). While these readings unsettle our understanding of medieval subjectivity, their unquestioning assumptions about the scene's emotional content reinforce the notion that fear is the understood (read: approved) response to abjection.

In *The Pardoner's Tale* and other texts, the impulse to attribute negative responses to fear is understandable enough. In *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva argues that, when "[c]onfronted with states of distress that were evoked for us by the child who makes himself heard but is incapable of making himself understood, we, adults, use the word 'fear'" (33). In the same way, critics attribute negative reactions in texts to fear: the child cannot articulate the cause of distress, the text does not. As observing adults or observant readers we can only guess, and we guess fear. While I am indebted to Kristeva's understand-

ing of abjection for my argument, her explanation of the interrelation between fearfulness and abjection is less useful. She asks "why is it phobia that best allows one to tackle the matter of relation to the object? Why fear *and* object?" (33). But she does not find a clear answer to her own question. Referring to Otto Rank's comments on birth trauma, Kristeva concludes:

> Fear, therefore, in a first sense, could be the *upsetting* of a bio-drive balance. The constitution of the object relation might then be a reiteration of fear, alternating with optimal but precarious states of balance. Fear and object proceed together until the one represses the other. But in which one of us is that fully successful?
>
> (33-4)

The final question in the above quotation turns the text away from an inquiry into *why* fear and toward an inquiry into the *machinations* of fear. The two sentences that ought to answer the question, though, are plagued by uncertain verbs: "Could," "might be." More importantly, an inquiry into why it's fear begs the question of *whether* it's fear. When the text remains silent, neither naming the emotions at play nor providing enough physical description to infer the emotions (racing heart, sweating, and so on), we finally cannot know. Since even precise physical descriptions can be misleading ("a racing heart," or "sweating" might just as easily describe excitement as fear), even hard evidence becomes suspect and calls into question the possibility of interpreting emotion at all. What is possible, however, is to examine the implications of overriding our epistemological limitations.

In her work on abjection, Kristeva explores the interrelation between fearfulness and abjection, but the cultural implications of interpreting emotions are made clearer by an anthropological model that focuses on culture rather than a psychoanalytic model that focuses on the individual subject. David Scruton, in his anthropology of fear, *Sociophobics*, observes that "[f]ear is commonly thought of as an innate human trait, the result of the species' phylogenetic development, something which is triggered by various stimuli and experienced in phylogenetic terms" (9-10). However, he argues against a purely biochemical-based explanation of fear; instead, he finds "biology is, in fact, nondirective" and that emotions occur in a cultural matrix (10). Fear, he argues, is an event like any emotion and as such is experienced within a "framework of social relations" (18). This means that when we experience fear, we do so as a function of our culture; it also means that fear has specific consequences. Scruton's point here has important implications for the way theorists read emotions:

> It is altogether unlikely that emotions can occur, be mediated as we have described, and have no results. On the contrary, emotions do have important consequences: they influence our behavior. They are means, in fact, through which society accomplishes vital tasks, for they are instrumental in encouraging conformity to significant behavioral and attitudinal norms of that society. They provide individuals with approved and accepted response tendencies in situations which are judged to be important.
>
> (26)

If the Host indeed fears the Pardoner, he does so not out of an innate response, but as a culturally encoded event. But this would also mean that the Host — and other medieval subjects — fear the same things we do, that they are the products of the same culture. Readings that assume the Host fears the Pardoner not only rely on an ahistorical understanding of abjection but further reinforce fear of abjection as a cultural norm: it is as acceptable to laugh at the chicken as it is to fear the abject.

Other assumptions about fear make these readings dangerous. Scruton notes that we tend to believe fear is an innate response to dangerous situations and triggers a flight-or-fight mechanism. Because we see fear as a means of protection from danger, we tend also to judge less harshly the actions of a fearful person: if the fear response is primal, then it is in some measure beyond rational control and originates in the drive toward self-preservation. Self-defense is more comprehensible, and invariably more forgivable, than aggression. Perpetuating an understanding that fear constitutes a culturally approved response to abjection also perpetuates a culture in which violence against abjected bodies is more comprehensible and thus more forgivable. When criticism of *The Pardoner's Tale* focuses on the Pardoner's abjection as an obvious incitement to fear, it tacitly pardons the Host's response. No one questions whether the Host responds reasonably; they know he fears because they assume it's normal to fear abjection. While the Pardoner thus comes under further scrutiny, further abjected by the writers who wish to understand him, the Host escapes interrogation.

The implications of such criticism, or even of laughing at a chicken joke, may not appear to invoke dire consequences. But the other joke I cite at the beginning of this article does. In her essay on Matthew Shepard's murder, Wypijewski refers to the clichéd line between love and hate to argue that such a line is kept strong by "all the little things of a culture, mostly unnoticed and unremarked" (67). And when we notice those lines (on one side is love — or at least its possibility — acceptance, normalcy; on the other side is hatred, abjection, perversion), even if we notice them only to decry them, we often reinstantiate them: "Among those who advocate hate-crime laws, it's always the sexuality of the victim that's front and center, not the sexuality of the criminal or the everyday, undifferentiated violence he took to extremity" (73). When the abjected body is homosexual, we have a peculiar way of naming such acts of violence — homophobia — that carries an excuse within its condemnation. Calling such acts "phobic" means they are rooted in fear, a fear we believe is beyond our control and is part of our self-defense mechanism.

Both Aaron McKinney and his girlfriend, Kristen Price, wanted to rely on a shared understanding that the abjected homosexual quite reasonably incites homophobia and thus a violent response: "presuming homophobia to be an acceptable alibi, [Price] thought she was helping him when she told the press that he and Henderson 'just wanted to beat [Shepard] up bad enough to teach him a lesson not to come on to straight people'" (Wypijewski 63). And although he told the police that Shepard did not hit on him, McKinney later wrote to someone, attempting to exonerate himself: "'Being a verry [sic] drunk homophobick [sic] I flipped out and began to pistol whip the fag with my gun'"

(63). While Wypijewski repeatedly interrogates the assumptions that enable such violence, her essay reveals that few others in Laramie or elsewhere do. Even the director of a program with the Southeast Wyoming Mental Health Center attributes McKinney's actions to fear: "'When it's fear or hurt, which is typically the primary emotion at work, when you can't say, "I'm scared shitless," most hurt and fear will come out in the only vehicle men are allowed. It comes out crooked. It looks like anger, it's expressed as anger but it isn't'" (quoted in Wypijewski 70). How does he know? We need to believe fear motivates such crimes because violence rooted in fear still leaves McKinney and Russell Henderson as people we can in some way accept as human.

Two responses typify our reactions to the Matthew Shepard murder, the Littleton, Colorado murders, the dragging death of James Byrd in Jaspar, Texas: one posits the killers as afraid, the other calls them monsters. We are prepared either to accept the crimes as understandable because the violence initiated from a primal response or to reject these men as not fully human. Any other explanation threatens our conception of humanity. Regardless of our responses, of course, they are human. But to assert that their violence originates in fear leaves an important part of our culture unexamined. At the beginning of her essay, Wypijewski claims, quite radically, that "[i]t's just possible that Matthew Shepard didn't die because he was gay; he died because Aaron McKinney and Russell Henderson are straight" (62). An ethical response to Matthew Shepard's murder would question not only the crime, but why McKinney and others think that fear of abjection helps to explain, if not to excuse it.

This interrogation needs to occur in all readings of culture, including readings of literature. In January 1999, *PMLA* devoted an issue to ethics. While the articles contribute to the discussion of ethics in literary studies, not one article interrogates the cultural implications of how we read. Whether scenes like those of *The Pardoner's Tale* merely reveal or actively produce fear matters less than our professional responsibility to examine the ways our reading practices may participate in normalizing violent phobias. It is the interpretation, not the creation, of the scene between the Host and Pardoner that should concern us because it is impossible to know what motivates the Host to react as he does. And the gap in this text does not comprise one of the small inconsequential gaps Wayne Booth so engagingly ridicules; this gap is the unbridgeable distance between heaven and hell, with a deadly temptation in the middle — the temptation to assume we know what motivates others, to assume that certain emotional responses are now and have always been "normal." Which is not to say critics should refrain from commenting on such stubborn texts, but their commentary ought to include (or at least have considered) its own assumptions and consequences. Sure the chicken joke is funny, but what are we doing when we laugh at it, and what are we doing when we fear the Pardoner?

I would like to thank Gary Taylor, Sheree Meyer, Sharon O'Dair, Harold Weber, and Elizabeth Meese for their helpful editorial comments.

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